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# The Fireholder

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## Chapter 1 by Hunter Strickland

"One more story father. Will you please?" The wise eyes of the Hayr-thien considered the young girl from a deeply lined face. A soft smile formed on his lips. Drawing her close to him he replied, "The sun is yet above the trees, though night will draw soon. And yet, I believe there is time for one more tale. But tonight I am not your father, and you are not my daughter. You are Maella of the Great Forest, and tonight you hold the fire." Slowly and gently he pulled a great cloak about his shoulders made from the bone-white feathers of Ghost Owls. "Come," he said. He turned to leave the hut, but the girl caught his hand. Against her will small tears welled in her eyes. "Will I still be your daughter even after I've held the fire?" He turned and knelt before her. "Sweet Maella. Until the last tree of the Great Forest falls you are my daughter. Until the stars burn out and night is forever I am your father. And I love you." Maella squeezed him tight, allowing herself a few more tears, but only a few.

Outside, the sun could barely be seen atop the tree line. The first stars of twilight were beginning to shine through the orange and gold haze of sunset. "Long ago," the Hayr-thien said, "before the sun burned in the sky and the Earth had taken form there was a goddess, Laylannea, who fell in love with a god named Alluvion. So great was their love that their passion ignited the

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numerous were her tears. Her tears watered the Earth, giving life to the Great Forest. After centuries of waiting, with no sign of her lover, she began to grow fearful for his safety. She went searching throughout the heavens scattering her tears across the sky. Even now they still twinkle and shine each night. Yet the Sun remains to warm us, and the Moon remains to guide us. A reminder to us that once there was only darkness, but love brought light to the heavens and the Earth." He handed a blazing torch to Maella. "Fire protects and guides us too when the darkness comes. It is the only thing that holds them at bay. Tonight you will wield it and give our people safety."

Maella took the torch proudly, feeling the smoothness of the well-shaped wood and the grooves from the intricate patterns carved along its length. The two walked to the edge of the village where the Great Forest grew thick, stretching on to the horizon and beyond. Passing into the trees, all fell deeply silent. The Moon was now shining brightly in the sky and Laylannea's tears shined across the black bowl of the firmament, and yet they could see none of it. The trees of the Great Forest towered as high as a hundred men. Many were so thick that thirty men could hug the width of their trunks and never touch one another. They were as ancient as time itself. The walk seemed to stretch on for an eternity, until at last, by torchlight, Maella could make out a ladder, hewn of wood and woven cord, hanging from the largest tree she had ever seen. Even amongst giants, it appeared massive. The Hayr-thien stood by watching thoughtfully as Maella began the dangerous climb, still clutching the torch in one hand.

The climb went slowly. Only once did she slip. About halfway up she misjudged the distance to the next rung and lost footing. Her heart lurched into her throat, but she caught herself with her free arm. She held the torch firmly though, collected herself, and pressed on. Finally her hand reached the last rung, and she pulled herself up onto a large platform. The platform was anchored to the tree and stretched two thirds of its circumference. Seven large braziers sat evenly spaced along the length of the decking. To her right there was a large pile of firewood. She set about placing wood in the braziers and lighting each one in turn. The darkness was heavy now and the light was a welcome sight. It wouldn't be long now until one of them came. Maella had never seen one before, but every night since she was a little girl she heard their

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pushed them back. She sat next to the middle brazier wrapping her arms around her knees. From this height she could just make out the Moon through the dense canopy. She pondered the tale her father had told her earlier. If it were true, she saw little comfort in the promise of a parting gift. One that had remained unrequited for centuries amidst tears of sorrow. But mostly she waited, fighting back her own tears. She was the fire holder, the guardian of her people, and guardians did not cry.

Far below, the Hayr-thien still stood, watching until the seventh fire began to burn. Off to his left and right he knew the other fires were being lit now. A ring of light to encircle the village. At last he turned to leave, a pale black form in the dark. His great Ghost Owl cloak made no sound as he walked out of sight. But somewhere far off in the wood, as faint as a whisper but as deep as thunder, he could hear the footsteps of giants.

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